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JAPANESE STUDENT AT UM
ENJOYS EDUCATION AMERICAN-STYLE

By Megan McNamer
UM Publications and Media Relations

MISSOULA--

Fortunately skiing wasn't the only thing that attracted Yumiko Nishimura to Montana. While sipping tea and nibbling osembei we watched the first real snowfall of the year through the windows of her Missoula apartment, and Yumiko explained why she came from Tokyo to the University of Montana to further her education.

"I wanted a relatively small university without a high-pressure atmosphere and I wanted to ski," she began.

So she applied to four schools that she felt met those criteria-- the University of Utah, the University of Oregon, Western Washington University and the University of Montana-- and was accepted by all. In addition to the prospect of good skiing, the University of Montana became her final choice because of her interest in North American Indians.

"The university seemed strong in that area, with good chances for study in the field. Also, I received very kind letters from the anthropology department here."

Now a graduate student in anthropology and five months into her experience of study abroad, Yumiko seems happy with her choice.

And what about the lack of snow?

"Well, it's disappointing, but not so bad." A trip to Jackson Hole with the

(more)

"JAPANESE" -- add one

the UM Ski Club over Christmas break brought some skiing. And lately the local picture has been whiter.

I asked Yumiko about the ups and downs of her experience here.

"My English is bad. As well as studying anthropology, I want to improve my English in order to have a profession when I go back to work in Japan. Speaking English is a kind of profession. With ability in English I could free lance at good jobs rather than being tied into one company. Otherwise, in Japan a job with a company is for life. I want more mobility than that. I considered entering a special English language school in the United States before coming to the university, but it is expensive, and I would probably be with other Japanese and so speak too much Japanese, not English.

"A Chinese friend, a Ph.D. candidate at Tokyo University, advised me to go ahead and enter a university in the United States. She said I could have access to good libraries and other resources and would be in a more secure position as a university student. Although I had hoped to find an intensive English-training course here, I feel better about my English now than I did three months ago. In Japan we begin studying English in junior high, but studying does not mean speaking."

Despite her language difficulties, Yumiko aced three graduate-level anthropology courses last quarter.

And what are her impressions of her fellow UM students?

They seem younger than her classmates did at the International Christian University in Tokyo, Yumiko said. Of course, some time has passed since she graduated with a degree in liberal arts in 1976. Since then she worked as an

(more)

"JAPANESE" -- add two

editor for an employment publication in Tokyo. Still, she remembers her beginning freshman class as more serious-minded than the freshmen at UM and generally less fashion-conscious.

"But Japanese and American cultures in general are very similar on the surface," Yumiko said.

One way in which her American university experience differs from that in Japan is the position of the professor, Yumiko feels.

"For both, the way of instruction of course depends on the personality of the teacher, but Japanese teachers are more authoritarian. That is, students there are intimidated by their teachers and afraid to ask questions. American teachers are more approachable - open to questions and complaints. I like that. But, too, American teachers seem a little intimidated by their students. We don't have an evaluation system in Japan. I feel a teacher will lose his personality, his own unique way, through an evaluation system."

Another big difference, she explained, is in terms of pressure on the student.

"In Japan, there is great difficulty in entering a good university. A student's future can be seen at the entrance. Of course, good grades are needed, but entry is the thing. Much preparation is needed for the entrance examination. In the U.S., that emphasis is placed on getting good grades after entering a university. But in Japan attending a big-name university is almost a prerequisite for a really good job. And to attend a big-name university you have to attend a big-name high school, which means attending a big-name junior high, all the way down to kindergarten."

(over)

"JAPANESE" -- add three

Is it expensive to attend the big-name institutions?

Not exactly. Generally the public universities are better than the private ones and all public universities are very inexpensive, Yumiko explained. But a prospective applicant has to take time to study a lot, hire tutors, and attend private preparatory schools before taking the entrance exams. All of which requires money.

"Nowadays, Japanese are trying to change this system. I hope that situation comes to Japan where students would have more freedom to change degrees or get jobs more easily outside their exact field of study."

Yumiko said that she was surprised at the number of older students on campus at the University of Montana and that there were handicapped students.

"The handicapped student in Japan doesn't have a very good environment," she said. "And generally, once a student has graduated from school and is working, they would not go back to school."

That, she explained is due mainly to the difference in the job systems of Japan and the United States. In Japan, if a person were to quit a job to return to school he or she would have a hard time finding another good position.

"The 'life-time' job system of Japan provides security," said Yumiko. "There are no lay-offs. But there's also no mobility, it's really limited."

For herself, Yumiko Nishimura hopes to continue studying, both at the University of Montana and later in Japan.

"I'm just now beginning to really feel comfortable here. I miss Japan - especially around Christmas and New Year, I missed lots of people on the streets, all the excitement of Tokyo. But I like my life here, the people and my studies."

(more)

"JAPANESE" -- add four

She attributes much of her enjoyment to the help and concern shown by her host family, Dick and Dorothy Guth and their four daughters. Two daughters, Heidi and Gretchen Guth, are also UM students. Yumiko was put in touch with the Guths by the Foreign Students office at the university.

"They are really cheerful," Yumiko said of her family. "They have a special interest in foreign cultures and are really open-minded. They are very...what's the word? Like that," she said, pointing at the light.

"Warm?" I offered.

"Well..." she seemed doubtful. "The Japanese word is 'yasashii'."

I looked it up later in a Japanese-English dictionary. It said, "gentle, warm-hearted, tender."

I decided to add it to my vocabulary.

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